

National Heritage Team of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Oral History Program
Subject/USFW Retiree: Jerry L. Wilson
Date: September 26, 2005
Interviewed by: Denny Holland

Denny Holland:

This is interview with Jerry L. Wilson, retiree U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, on September 26, 2005, at his home at 10755 W Highway 44, Rapid City, South Dakota. And I am Denny Holland, retiree also. And Jerry and I have known each other for a number of years. He retired, so this is Jerry's story, so you can tell us when you retired, and then take us back through a brief history of your Fish and Wildlife Service.

Jerry Wilson:

I retired in June of 2002, as manager of Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge in Parkersburg, West Virginia.

A little bit on my personal information is I was born in Tazewell, Virginia in 1947. My parent's names were Leon Wilson and Dorothy Jane Wilson. My mother was a housewife and my father was a service manager for the Department of Transportation in the service garage.

My early years pretty much were spending like most kids in that part of the country; I really had a love for hunting and fishing. Predominately, I spent most of my time doing that other than odd chores, mowing yards and things like that to make a few extra dollars. And I guess the hobbies that affected me the most was the hunting and fishing to go into Fish and Wildlife Service. And I guess the event was I had the opportunity to work with some of the folks at Virginia Division of Game and Inland Fisheries, and that kind of gave me the idea that I wanted a career in Fish and Wildlife. And as a child most of my jobs as child were just typical jobs, carry out jobs and things like that, with the exception of the one with Virginia Game and Inland Fisheries, which I helped prepare food plots and stuff in the Jefferson National Forest. And yes, I did hunt and fish a lot.

My education is I graduated from Tazewell High School in 1965. I attended East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee, and graduated in 1974, with a Bachelor of Science degree with a double major in geography.

My age and my biological programs in the university equipped me for the future, which basically influenced my education and career track with the Fish and Wildlife Service. And the first thing I did, of course, is pursued the opportunity to do the Office of Personnel Management, and managed to secure several government jobs before I went to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service. They were temporary jobs, and then I moved over to the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1976, at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.

Denny Holland:

Chincoteague was doing good as a public use area at that time, is that right Jerry?

Jerry Wilson:

Chincoteague was. And I had, I guess, as a refuge manager trainee came in, I worked for the famous J.C. Appel.

Denny Holland:

Oh yes.

Jerry Wilson:

And I'd understood that there were five or six trainees before me, and I was fortunate enough to be one of the ones that actually made it past the rock and made it on with my career. And I did experience some challenging times at Chincoteague. It was a very interesting place to work. It was probably one of the two close-knit communities that I worked with in my career; Chincoteague being one and the other one being in Eufaula, Alabama, which we'll talk about later.

Chincoteague had a very major public use program at that time, and my job predominately was dealing with the Public Use Program and administering the hunts and basically the public use activities. And I remained at Chincoteague for about a year and a half or so before I moved on to assistant manager at Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge in Texas.

Do you want to discuss a little bit about my military service?

Denny Holland:

Yes, go ahead, um hmm.

Jerry Wilson:

The next question is my military service. I was in the United States Air Force, three years, nine months, and 28 days. My predominant duty station was Ellsworth Air Force Base in Rapid City, South Dakota, which basically led to the reason of me falling in love with the Black Hills and retiring here.

Denny Holland:

Right, I can understand that.

Jerry Wilson:

I didn't receive any decorations or anything like that. I did receive an injury while I was in the service. And of course that gave me the Veteran's Preference, which really, I think, assisted in securing a job with the federal government also, even though my scores were high and everything.

My spouse; I was married for 22 years, pretty much my career through the Fish and Wildlife Service, I was divorced in 1995. And I guess... The family moved, we moved around a lot, and my wife worked a little bit part-time jobs. I don't think it really affected her that way. But what I did realize when I got to Eufaula, my son had lived in Ruby Valley in an isolated station with me for four years, and he was really prepared and a

little bit ahead in shoulders above the others kids about his exposures to real-life situations, that maybe a lot of kids in urban environments don't get.

Denny Holland:

And how many kids do you have?

Jerry Wilson:

I have two children; Jonathan Lee Wilson, who graduated from Parkersburg High School. He received a full scholarship for Marietta College, which is a private institution. He graduated from there. He was accepted into medical school in Morgantown, West Virginia, and he's in his first year of internship. He has one more year of internship and then he will be seeking, he's already started trying to secure residency, so it looks like he's going to be a doctor eventually in a few years.

Denny Holland:

Oh boy, very good. And...

Jerry Wilson:

My daughter graduated from Parkersburg High School. And she attended one year at Ohio State University. And right now she's filling out her paperwork to attend West Virginia University in Parkersburg, and that way she'll be able to live at home there and try to pick up on her courses. She's looking at pretty much nursing now. She started with dental hygiene, but I think she's going to change over to nursing right now. They're both doing real well in school, and they both did real well in undergraduate.

Denny Holland:

What attracted you into Fish and Wildlife Service? Begin with...

Jerry Wilson:

Well, like I said earlier, I worked for Virginia Division of Game and Inland Fisheries. And I knew I wanted a career in the Fish and Wildlife Service, and I guess what really... After I did that, I went into the military in the Air Force, traveled to South Dakota. And while I was out here, when I got out of the service, I had an opportunity to build up a little bit of money before I went back school I worked for a moving company. And I remember moving an individual out of the Badlands National Park, a park service employee. And I knew at that time after talking to him for awhile that I wanted to secure federal employment if I could. And my entire young age I hunted and fished a lot, and that kind of steered me towards Fish and Wildlife Service.

Denny Holland:

And so you took off from there?

Jerry Wilson:

I took off from there. After I got out of the military I went back and used the GI Bill to go to college. And after that I started with the OPM Registers and was picked up, I went to work. My first job with the government was with the Bureau of Land Management in

Rawlins, Wyoming as an environmental specialist for oil and gas exploration back in the '70's. Then I took a quick stint as a park ranger with the Corps of Engineers on the Missouri River. And from there I secured the refuge manager's training job at Chincoteague in 1976.

Denny Holland:

And that was the beginning of your true downfall!

Jerry Wilson:

That was the beginning of my downfall! Well, it did have some challenging times. I never will forget one thing; J.C. Appel had said to me, we had a maintenance supervisor that worked there who was pretty tough to deal with, O.D. Justice. Anybody who went through Chincoteague knew O.D. Justice. And he said, "Well, in your career you're going to find a lot of rocks in the road." He said, "What are you going to do?" And I said, "Well, having learned an experience here, I'm going to try to break some of them up instead of going around them, because you just leave them for the next guy behind you if you don't." So that was a real trying experience for me with the Fish and Wildlife Service at Chincoteague.

Denny Holland:

And from Chincoteague?

Jerry Wilson:

I traveled to Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, and I worked on a Corps of Engineers overlay on Lake Texoma. And I was there about a year and a half, and I had an opportunity to work with a guy by the name of Burt Blair.

Denny Holland:

Oh, I know Burt, yeah.

Jerry Wilson:

And Burt is the only I guy I knew that bought \$70,000.00 worth of steel fencepost to build a road all the way around a refuge. And fortunately he didn't succeed in that activity. And that was a real challenge and experience there. I had some opportunities where Burt... You just had to know Burt Blair.

I saw some things at Hagerman that I did not want to do in my career, or I was not going to tolerate in my career at other stations. So it was also a character building experience for me.

Denny Holland:

Yes, this was training ground.

Jerry Wilson:

It was, it was really a training ground. And I guess the next refuge I moved on to, I went to... I never will forget, we were in Texas; Glenn Carowan was over at Tishomingo, I was

at Hagerman, and Jim Hubert was I think the refuge supervisor in Austin at this time. So Jim called Glenn and I down to Austin and he said, "Boy's," he said, and there was one other guy with us and I can't remember his name, he said, "One of you is going to Laguna Atascosa." And they had a plan for us in Region 2. And that was at the time they were having trouble filling vacancies, so what they did is they just advertised within the region. Well, I knew a friend in D.C. who was a "biggie" in the U.S. Geological Survey who was good friends with a fellow in the Fish and Wildlife Service named Ed Collins. So Ed Collins was at Sacramento. So Glenn and I managed to get some "Greensheets" outside the region for some vacancies. And I think Glenn ended up going to Savannah and I ended up going to Sacramento, California.

So Jim Hubert said, "It's kind of like Murphy's Law, sometimes you win and sometimes you don't." So we kind of slid out of Region 2.

Well, I went to Sacramento. I guess Sacramento was one of the better experiences, particularly with waterfowl. Sacramento has one of the largest impoundment systems probably in the Fish and Wildlife Service anywhere. A maintenance staff at that time when I got there was like 20, and it was just there was a mix of professions there. And my job was to basically... I went in to actually run the field crew, and they had some manager transferees and a few little difficulties there. So I ended up supervising a biological crew and I ran the entire maintenance crew in the field. And that was on five refuges.

And this was at the time we were in the process acquiring the Butte Sink. And it was also in the process of the big implementation of the steel shot issue at Delevan Refuge. So I was right on the cutting edge of that, and on some of the first refuges that implemented steel shot. So that was very challenging.

That combined with an extensive waterfowl management program, working with the University of California, and then with the California State Fish and Game folks, and then also the opportunity to work in the disease monitoring and the disease die-off.

That was a real experience for me and I learned a lot in those four years.

Denny Holland:

Did you get a lot of flack on the steel shot from your hunters?

Jerry Wilson:

Actually, what happened was Delevan Refuge... Well, actually the state was big on birds per hunter average, you know. So they always came with their little sheets for the meetings. Delevan had the highest birds per hunter average in the state at the implements and steel shot issue there. So that was pretty hard to contend that. We got some complaints on it, but it was actually more hyped up from the outside than the hunter. And it was groups, big groups that didn't want it, or the states who didn't want it. They would incite these people more than the actual guy out in the field. I found that, in a lot of meetings we went to I found that.

But it went over fairly well, they had a really quality hunting program on Delevan, and we never had any shortage of people. I mean a lot of people wanted to hunt Delevan.

And Sacramento, I worked there and I supervised some personnel problems and things in the field we had. Then I felt after four years it was time to move on, so I put in for the job at...

Denny Holland:

Excuse me; you were at Sacramento for four years?

Jerry Wilson:

Four years, for four years.

Denny Holland:

Okay.

Jerry Wilson:

I put in for the job as a manager at Red Rock Lakes in Montana. And lo and behold, I got it. Well, now at this time they had some problems at Ruby Lake. Anybody that's familiar with Ruby Lake. So I'd accepted the job at Red Rock Lakes. And Larry Debates called me up and he said, "We'd like to have you go to Ruby Lake as manager." He said, "We need somebody with your PR skills in Ruby Lake." I said, "Well, I've already accepted Red Rock Lakes." And he said, "We'll take care of that." So they did. And it might have hurt my future opportunities to get in Region 6.

So I went to Ruby Lake. And the only thing there was an area manager there, Sweeney; Bill Sweeney I believe was his name. Bill Sweeney said, "When you go to Ruby Lake either the politicians are going to get you or the agency is going to get you." Well, I said, "No that just couldn't be." Well, I came to find out real quick when I went to Ruby Lake exactly what he was talking about.

I was there about a week and I went into town for a public meeting, and it was over the power-boating issue, anybody who's familiar with that. And I was in a public meeting, and the first thing they told me when I got there was do not wear a uniform shirt in town. So I didn't. So I went to this public meeting, I was sitting in the back of the room of about 250 people. And Senator "Chic" Hecht was there, and he got up and he said, "Is Mr. Wilson in the crowd?" Well, they already knew I was there. So I went and met with him in a back room, and he said, "You know, we're going to change those regs and allow power boats early." And I told him, I said, "Well, if you do, we're probably going to be back in court."

And sure enough they changed the regs, made the signs up for it. But the one comment he did say when he went to Washington, he said, "You know, when we came through Elko every federal agency they had there hid but Mr. Wilson, we'll have to give him credit for that."

So they changed the regulations. And we went through... In the wisdom of the Washington office, that was one of the years in Ruby Valley that we had the "hundred-year flood." So the canvasback nesting was way late. So it was going to impact right in the middle of the power-boating, the new regulation change. So in the wisdom of the Washington office, which they always know best, they decided to write the FONSI. So they wrote the FONSI with Finding of No Significant Impacts.

Well, the defenders called me on about on a Friday and said, "Did the staff at the refuge have any input in the FONSI?" I said, "No, we did not." He said, "That's all we needed to know." So they filed an injunction and they stopped the power-boating issue.

Well, several instances that occurred in the past, and at one point they had a lot of agents there and refuge employees, and they wrote like 200 and some tickets on the others cases. Well here it was on about a Thursday or Friday and there was an injunction, there were about 3,000 people there. And the reason why all of this, "Well, how many people do you need standing by and everything like that?" I said, "I'm going to go down to "shantytown" and I'm going to get Phil Mariluch; Phil Mariluch, as you entered in his house he had a statue of John Wayne. Phil Mariluch, the sheriff gave him a badge to check on the cabins out there, but he was a well-respected guy. He was crude and rough around the edges, but well-respected. And I told Phil, I said, "Phil, we've got a dilemma here." I said, "We've got an injunction on that thing," and I said, "There's a lot of people I hear that's irritated." And I said, "If you'd help me I'd appreciate it, I'll do the main boat landing if you do the Narciss." And Phil said he would. Well, I took some foul language and stuff like that. We never wrote a ticket. There were no complications for it. There were no confrontations or anything like that other than some verbal words. The thing went over pretty smoothly.

And I think the Service at points should be more creative in how they deal with situations. And law enforcement is a necessary tool, but sometimes it can alienate more than it can cure.

And this went over real well. And I think the refuge after that gained a lot of respect for that. And I never will forget Mel, I can't think of his last name, he was the editor of the paper there, and I know when I first got there that he was one of the guys I met. And he said, "You know, you're going to be kind of like a mushroom, they're going to feed you bullshit and keep you in the dark."

But after I got there I asked around, and I'm going to go into this a little bit because if younger guys listen to this it will help you. I asked around and I said, "Who are the six most influential people in Ruby Valley?" One of them was Paul Sawyer, who was a power broker for Senator Laxalt. The other one was; there was... I can't think of their names, there were six guys. But Paul Sawyer was the key that I dealt with. And Paul, who was the type a guy, I called him out and I said, "Paul, on this canvasback nesting and everything," I said, "do you really know why they don't want the powerboats on there?" I said, "If those birds are exposed for any length of time in that high intense heat then it's a

done deal, they're not going to hatch." And he said, "Well, nobody really ever explained that to us." I said, "Well, that's the part, the dehydration; if the hen is off the nest for a period of time the eggs will dehydrate." So Paul and I became good friends.

They had a meeting there, and Senator Laxalt was running for President, was going to run for President, and we got flooded. So the congressman's aide had made a stink and went to the congressman about we were going to close fishing. Well, the Narciss Boat Landing was under two foot of water, and so Paul made the congressman's aide apologize to me at the alliance meeting that day. And Senator Chic Hecht was in town, Ted Stevens of Alaska, Laxalt, Vucanovich, and there was one other; there was like five congressman and senators in town. Paul said, "You come to the public gathering." He said, "You meet me and we'll go in the back room and we'll fix this."

So I went in the back room with Paul, and the roads were flooded in, and there was a big controversy there about digging the ditches out with the bass. There was a large bass population, and it was really good fishing, the only place to go, but they're real small, stunted bass. And for years we'd had the controversy about dredging and conflict with the state about the bass. And I said, "Paul, I'll tell you what we can do." He said, "How much money do you need?" And I said, "Well, to fix the roads and the boat landings, we're going to need about \$600,000.00 or \$800,000.00." And I said, "While we're at it, why don't we clean those drainage canals and deepen them, and that will provide you some winter survival for your bass severed loss. That will get us much better water capability and we can flood of the North Sump." Senator Laxalt said, "Well, how about a million?" Ten days later we had a million bucks. So we went in there and we cleaned some of the ditches out, we fixed all the roads. And actually I had upwards of 20 some volunteers with their dump trucks that came in and hauled gravel and helped us get that boat landing open for that fishing.

And I felt when I left there I built a good community rapport. Paul and I became good friends; he was a very influential guy.

And then after we got all of this settled down, we had a research study come in, and I need to go into this history, it's very important. We had a research study come in from the folks from North Dakota, I think North Dakota or South Dakota, where's that big research facility up there; Northern Prairie, from Northern Prairie Research.

Well, the first they did is after we had everything calmed down we were going to do a report on it. They were going to do a research study when the congressman and the senator had proposed this regulation change to prove that it was not going to be an impact. In reality they designed the study to prove it would be an impact, but we weren't supposed to tell anybody that.

So we had restricted the use of powerboats there until after July 15, you could only use electric motors to that point. But the research team decided that they needed powerboats prior to that date. Now we'd had eleven years of controversy running powerboats in it, and I said, "You don't want to do that, its suicide."

So just to show they were in charge, they sent a guy from Washington out to run a powerboat in the electric motorboat season in front of the people. Okay, design a study.

So Paul Sawyer, a very, very influential guy, a very influential guy. And they were designing the study to use powerboats when the people had to use electric motors, which was foolish, which was suicide in that case. So the only thing Paul told me was he said, "When the study starts and they bring the motors it's done." Little did they know who he was, but Northern Prairie called me real quick and said, "Who in the hell is Paul Sawyer?"

Well, Paul Sawyer was personal friends with Ronald Reagan. And Paul, when Paul would go down to Ronald Reagan's birthday parties he always gave me his number in case things would come up. Paul was very influential, but he was a down to earth guy, and I have tremendous respect for him. He never asked me to do anything wrong on that refuge if we communicated.

So Paul said, "We're not going to set here and let them run that down our nose like that. If there's an impact to those birds on our gas motor, there's an impact on your gas motor. It made common sense to me.

So when that all happened, Paul picked up the phone and made one phone call and the research study ended immediately. It was killed and it will never, never go back to Ruby Lake on that study again. It was the foolishness of...

Denny Holland:
Of their leader.

Jerry Wilson:
You bet. We should have used common sense with it; we could have done our study. And I told them, I said, "Boys, you're going to kill yourself when you come at that study like that. It's not going to fly. The politics is too powerful there."

And at that time, the Deputy Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service was a guy by the name of Steve Robinson. Well, Steve Robinson, Paul Sawyer got Steve Robinson his first job. So, the link was there. And I told Jim Gillette, you know Jim Gillette? I told Jim Gillette, I was in D.C., I said, "Jim, when they change these regulations, I'm good friends with Paul Sawyer, I'm telling you, he's going to see if the Service will jump. You don't have to do it." He said, "Are you sure?" I said, "I'm positive Jim, I'm telling you." So needless to say, I no more got on the plane and the Fish and Wildlife Service changed them. And we went through that whole rigmarole because Paul said we were just going to push up to the point, and we'll back away. But the Service went and gave it to them. When they did that, that drug the fingers back in it again, and we were sued again.

And it goes down to the point of this, sometimes you should listen to the people in the field. And the Service has a tremendous reputation at times for not doing that. There are

a lot of controversies that could really have been minimized, very minimized, if you trust your people in the field. And I don't know how that is today; I've been out three years but...

Denny Holland:
It hasn't changed.

Jerry Wilson:
Yep, I doubt it's changed. And I can give you some case points when we get back to Ohio River.

But that was my stay at Ruby Lake. When I got Ruby Lake, then at that point I took so much heat, the regional director, Dick Myshak, from Region 1 called me and he said, and I have to Dick credit, he said, "Jerry, Washington has messed us up." He said, "We're going to get sued." He said, "You take a couple of days of administrative leave and call me at home before you go back to work. You're going to have to talk to Department of Justice." Well I did. The Department of Justice called and I talked to them, I explained to them, I said, "Boys, we tried to tell you it was a hundred-year flood. The birds were going to be nesting two weeks late. It was the worst year to try that."

And we finally got it all cleared up and everything smoothed up, but it cost a lot of heartache, pain, time. And after that we got a tremendous amount of support for the refuge. We never had, the remainder of the two years I was there, two and half years, we never had any controversy. And it's even pretty quiet today. It's pretty quiet today, you know. And I think I fought the last battle there. And I made some good rapport friends; I've still got friends there now. In fact, some of the guys even follow me in the fall and went fishing, some of the guys came down went fishing.

So, I think where the Service really misses the point sometimes is PR skills on how to deal with communities and local people. I think we really, really miss it there.

Denny Holland:
And the beginning point is you as the project leader working closely with the community from the very beginning.

Jerry Wilson:
Yes. And that first impression, if they like you and respect you they'll work with you. Don't feed them no bull.

And after I left Ruby Lake, things got so hot, and this is how I kind of got Eufaula. A lot of people don't know this. At that time of course everybody was shooting bullets at me, you know, because it embarrassed Northern Prairie and some people got embarrassed and they lost their study, and it was their own fault. So Jack Waddell, who just passed away recently, so Jack came down in his wisdom, and he was directed to give me an unsatisfactory performance evaluations, which he did. They offered me a transfer with two grades lower, bad performance evaluations and everything like that. So at that point

I had a chance to talk to Paul Sawyer again and he said, "How are you taking all of this?" And I told him what was going on. Well, Paul Sawyer called me in with Senator Laxalt, and his aide was there, a girl by the name of Karen, and Paul said, "You know, we changed those regulations, this man didn't. This man's been honest with us." And he said, "I'm not going to stand around let his agency crucify him."

So the next day I got a call from Larry Debates, they changed my performance evaluation. Actually, Dick Rodgers gave me a performance award. It's amazing how things can happen. Because I had the facts down, I was right, and it would embarrass some people, and I was supposed to be crucified. And even after this, there were more changes than that. This went down; this was how high level this was, because Larry Debates and Jack Waddell were involved in this. And Senator Laxalt came in. I got a call from somebody very high up, which was Paul Sawyer, he called me, he said, "You know, your boss and his boss, they got new jobs." That's when Larry Debates went over; Jack Waddell went to Federal Aide and Larry Debates went to some coordinator position. That's how high level it got. And Steve Robinson called me, the deputy director, he said, "Jerry, pick a job in the United States you want, wherever it's at." I said, "I don't want a promotion, I want to take a lateral." I said, "I was doing my job." He said, "We all know that." He said, "You pick a job you want." Eufaula was open, I knew Eufaula was a good and I said, "I'd like to go to Eufaula." And they took care of it. So I'm just telling you, politics is not always bad.

So I left out of there and went to Eufaula. And we'll start a little bit with Eufaula. Ruby Lake was a very challenging experience, its beautiful country; it's probably one of the prettiest refuges that I've ever worked at. I worked with the old fellow, Phil Mariluch, and it was a big thing. Every spring we used to open Harrison Pass so we could get to town. My kids grew up in Ruby Valley there, and it was really a wonderful experience.

From Ruby Valley I transferred down to Eufaula. Eufaula is probably one of the other places...

Denny Holland:
Where is it?

Jerry Wilson:
Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge in Eufaula, Alabama is probably one of the best communities that I lived in, in my career with the Fish and Wildlife Service. I was just well accepted into the community, invited to a lot of functions, and it was just a very pleasant southern hospitality experience while working at Eufaula.

Eufaula had a lot of wetland impoundments. We did some prescribed burning at Eufaula. Eufaula was kind of four years of just managing waterfowl. And it was kind of not a lot of big controversial issues occurred there, it was just more of one of those refuges you go in and you administer the refuge and somebody's not shooting at you every day. I had a

chance to work with Sonnie Corcoran, anybody that's been to Eufaula knows Sonnie Cochran.

Denny Holland:
Sonnie just recently died Jerry.

Jerry Wilson:
Did he?

Denny Holland:
Yes he did.

Jerry Wilson:
Doggone, I hated to hear that. The thing about Sonnie, his kind of sense of humor, he used to always say he made his living in the ditch row when he was planting peanuts. So we used to always get after him for plowing up the ditch row. So Sonnie said, "Well, I know you all go home at 4 o'clock," he said, "I'll just wait until after 4 o'clock and do it." So I happened to go to one of his employees one day and set there with him, and Sonnie called him about 4:30 and he said, "Well, I know they're all gone now, I guess we can plow up the ditches." I said, "Sonnie, we're still here you know." So I got along with him real well. And it follows just a wonderful, wonderful experience working there. My kids really liked the school there. And I bought a bass boat there and became friends with Tom Mann, a professional bass fisherman. In fact, he gave my going away party to me. He gave me three big boxes of Pogo Shads, and I've still been giving them things away, and I think there's some in the box sitting across the room over there, I still got some of those things.

Eufaula was a very, very, very good experience for me.

And then I got a call from a fellow who has since passed away, Lee Wright. Lee Wright was up in Region 5, and he said, "We've got this new refuge, the Ohio River Islands National Refuge that we need to get kick started." Well, they had no office, no vehicles, and some land they'd gotten from the Nature Conservancy.

So I didn't put in for the job first, so Lee called me back and said, "Boy, you embarrassed me." He said, "We're going to advertise it again, put in for it." So I put in for it. I accepted the manager's job at Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge, which was my last duty station in the Fish and Wildlife Service.

And I have some positive things about going there, and I have some regrets about going there. There were some things I had to do that probably restricted me from making another move in my career. There were some choices I had to make, which didn't make some people happy.

So I showed up. I left Eufaula in March of 1991, and I showed up at Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge in a motel room. I had no office, I had no vehicle. So I called

the regional office collect to see if we could possibly locate a vehicle and what we're going to do for an office space, and they wouldn't accept the call. So I finally went over and borrowed a vehicle from over in New Jersey. And I'll just stop for a moment here.

Starting up a new refuge is tough. Starting up a river refuge that involves four states, 14 congressional districts, eight senatorial districts, and tremendous mindsets, three Corps of Engineer districts, it can be a problem.

Denny Holland:
What states are involved?

Jerry Wilson:
West Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky were the four states.

Denny Holland:
All of those have congressional districts?

Jerry Wilson:
All of them have congressional and senatorial districts. The project, this project was established by Senator Byrd. He appropriated money. He was very supportive of the project. And a big credit for this refuge should always go to a fellow, we don't hear his name mentioned much, name of Bill Tolin over in Elkins; he's since retired from Ecological Services. Bill worked on the weekends on his own time to collect the data. He and the current refuge biologist still there today, Patty Morrison, worked on their own time on the weekends to collect the data to lead to the establishment of that refuge, and Bill and Patty both should be commended, particularly Bill.

And when I got there I took a refuge boundary sign and signed and gave it to old Bill. And he had it in his office until he retired just a couple of years ago, he kept it in there. I worked a lot with Bill; he was very supportive of us.

So eventually I borrowed a vehicle. I went down to the federal building to try to get some office space. Nothing, no groundwork was laid, and the federal building said they didn't have any office space. So I got to checking around and some of the offices there had slot machines stored in them. So working on Senator Byrd's staff, it was his congressional district they kept saying, "Where we can find an office?" I said, "Well, there's none at the federal building, but they've got slot machines stored."

Needless to say, a week later I had an office in the federal building. And I worked real close with Senator Byrd's staff, they were supportive of the refuge. We got a staff up to about five before I left.

We acquired upwards of... The project consisted of acquiring about 35 islands through the Ohio River, and we acquired up into the 20's before I retired, and I'm not sure they've acquired anything since I retired. It was a constant struggle to acquire land. Not so much that the opportunities weren't there, but it was a refuge that I do not think that the Fish

and Wildlife Service really totally wanted, and it was going to be a challenge to bring it online.

Working with the Realty Division in Region 5, I pulled tooth, nail. It was a constant, constant struggle working with those folks. And we worked with the Nature Conservancy, who bought some of the islands before. And the relationship between the Nature Conservancy and the Fish and Wildlife Service on some of those islands and some of those deals, they were a little bit skeptical when you looked at them, you know, things didn't fall into place. So I got crossways with different people when trying to put it together. But without the support of Senator Byrd's staff, that refuge would not be what it is today. And I understand now they've got some planning money to build an office design and everything like that. And I worked with Senator Byrd's staff on a lot of those before I retired.

I hired most of the staff. We developed, we had one of the only refuge dive teams in the Fish and Wildlife Service, we had a sanctioned dive team, which we worked work with Ecological Services, we worked with a lot of the states. It was one of the only dive teams in the Fish and Wildlife Service. We went all over Region 5. We had one of the assistant managers that worked for me at Eufaula Refuge transferred up there, Mitch Ellis. And he was also the head of the Refuge Law Enforcement Division in Washington, D.C. for awhile. Dean Rundle worked for me down in Eufaula also, and he was from up in that part of the country. And I think he's the manager at that Deep Refuge right outside of Denver.

Denny Holland:
Arsenal, Rocky Mountain.

Jerry Wilson:
Rocky Mountain Arsenal. And I guess that my 11 years at Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge was pretty much a struggle for land acquisition. We did develop one of the first Comprehensive Conservation Plans in the region.

The biggest two highlights of my career there, I guess you might say; one was the development of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan, the land acquisition. But I got to spend a day with Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt. And I'll tell you a little story on that. Bruce called up, his office did, and they said, "He wants to meet you down in Charleston and spend the day with you." Well I picked up Bruce, and the first thing he did is he turned off his cell phones so his security people couldn't talk to him and him and I spent the day together. And I'll tell you how he got there.

When we developed our Comprehensive Conservation Plan, we had a lot of controversy with the states of Ohio, particularly West Virginia. West Virginia, I wasn't there six months and they wanted me transferred. We had a lot of conflicts about uses on refuges. The biggest one was pursuit dogs. We had small parcels of land along the Ohio River which were not suitable for running a pack of dogs, pursuit dogs. And the population of anything they'd hunt with those was minimal. But it was just a tradition for them,

whether there was anything out there, they thought they should have a right just to turn the dogs loose. And I stood firm on that. And it actually came out in the Conservation Plan; we do not allow pursuit dogs. Needless to say, that I didn't have some controversy with my regional office on several different things over that issue, but I held firm. And we came out winning in the end on that.

But the reason Secretary Babbitt was there, I guess the state had contacted him and said, "You know, we've got this refuge manager here that we think could serve you better someplace else." So first thing, he went to a big cookout up in Canaan Valley up there and said that the more they ate and the more they drank that it became obvious that Mr. Wilson we needed to move on. And Bruce told me, and I respect him for this, he said, "You know, when they were telling me all the goods and the bad and everything like that, it told me there was some man out in the field doing his job." He said, "You've got no problem from me." And I really respected him for that, I really did.

And it was a constant struggle there to maintain and keep our money. The regional office was constantly pulling our money out, our land acquisition money was going someplace else and things like that, it was a constant struggle. I had to use the congressional influences a lot to basically keep our budget and keep our positions. If I hadn't of, they would have cleaned us dry. And if I understand correctly now, I've been retired three years, they haven't bought a parcel of land since I left, and they've got money there to do it with.

So, it was a constant struggle. And I think I jeopardized a little bit of my opportunities for other challenges in the Fish and Wildlife Service for some stands that I had to take at Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

I was blackballed on some jobs, and it was simply because of the fact that I wouldn't roll over and do what wasn't right, and I just was not going to do that. I have never compromised my principles to that point, and I wasn't going to start then. But in the Service you can pay a price for doing that, for doing what's right. You can pay a hard price, you know. And I never had, in my career I never had any personnel complaints or anything like that. I got along good with all of my staff and everything.

And while I was at the Ohio River Islands, one detail I went on I want to talk about a little bit. I was asked to go... Before I left Ohio River Islands there was a memo that came out one time, it said if you lobbied of course it could jeopardize your job. Well, it happened to be at one of those times, the establishment of the Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge. And the only thing that was being established was they were promising people a lot of different things which didn't fit into the scenario of refuges. And the first meeting I attended to, I wrote a 22 page memo, and I said, 'If we're buying a refuge to run cattle in the swamp and trying to justifying it, then we're missing the point here somewhere.' So I was kicked off the committee and I became very outspoken about, you know the things that they did. At one time Gene Hocutt, who was a friend of mine, was down on a detail, and Gene wrote a memo and I accidentally let some people see the memo that should have seen it, and of course all hell broke loose after that. Gene went

back to New York and I was supposed to go in and see Cathy Short on November 6, about some senate language that showed up. They were going to try to, in order to demean me and do me over they were going to try to complex me with Canaan. That was the intent of the regional office to do that, that was one of the plans. Jaime Geiger was my refuge supervisor at that time, and I said, "Jaime, that's bull." He said, "Well, just let it take its course." And I said, "No, that's bull Jaime."

Jaime, I have to say I liked old Jaime, but Jaime didn't back me. Well, I came out winning and Jaime came out losing. He was no longer the supervisor, he was moved back over.

But what happened was when they wrote that senate language in there, it showed up in the senate. Cathy Short called me to the regional office on November 8th, I never will forget that. Jaime Gallagher called and said, "Jerry, you've got to be up here next week on November 8th." He said, "They're probably going to fire you for that language, if you had anything to do with that language, that senate language." And I said, "Well, I didn't." I didn't write the language, I talked to Byrd's staff about that and I said, "You know, I'm about to get fired over this language in the senate." And Sue Masica was there. Sue said, "We wrote that language, you didn't." She said, "Those refuges are not going to be complex. That's not the name of the game here." Then in about five minutes I got a phone call from Jaime, he said I would no longer need to come to the regional office. So I had to take some stands like that.

And I guess when we dedicated the refuge Senator Byrd was there, the governor was there, the head of Nature Conservancy was there, there were a lot of "biggies" there. And I got to spend the day with Senator Byrd, and had become a pretty good first named basis with the guy. I had his local contact, which people today don't know who that is. He has a friend in the community he's very close with, he has a friend he's very close with. And I never shared it with my staff before I left because he was a powerful guy I used to make things happen. And this refuge is running pretty good now. We got the money in there for the office and everything. And the guy they replaced me came over from Hatcheries and stuff, and he's a pretty nice guy. And when you're playing those games, they can be dangerous games, you know. But if your heart's in the resource, you'll do the right thing, you know, and that's the key.

But I stayed there, we had the dedication, and then I retired in June of 2002. I had a pretty good career with the Fish and Wildlife Service. I could probably talk for days of other events and humorous things that went on.

I met some wonderful people, probably the highlight of my career was the people I met and worked with. In fact, Denny Holland is one of them; he's sitting across the room here. And that's the strength of the Fish and Wildlife Service, was in its people. It was.

KEY WORDS:**People:**

J.C. Appel; Bruce Babbitt; Burt Blair; Senator Robert Byrd; Glenn Carowan; Ed Collins; Larry Debates; Mitch Ellis; Senator Jacob "Chic" Hecht; Gene Hocutt; Denny Holland; Jim Hubert; Senator Paul Laxalt; Barbara Vucanovich; Tom Mann; Patty Morrison; Dick Myshak; Steve Robinson; Richard "Dick" Rodgers; Dean Rundle; Paul Sawyer; Cathy Short; Senator Theodore "Ted" Stevens; William "Bill" Sweeney; Bill Tolin; Jack Waddell; Jerry L. Wilson; Lee Wright; O.D. Justice; Phil Mariluch; Jim Gillette; Sonnie Cochran; Jaime Geiger; Sue Masica

Places:

Badlands National Park, Butte Sink Wildlife Management Area; Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge; Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge; Delevan National Wildlife Refuge, Sacramento, California; Ecological Services; Eufaula, Alabama; Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge; Jefferson National Forest; Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge; Lake Texoma; Narciss Boat Landing; North Sump; Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge, Parkersburg, West Virginia; Rawlins, Wyoming; Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, Montana; Rocky Mountain Arsenal; Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge; Tishomingo National Wildlife Refuge;

Books:**Divisions/Titles/Programs/Studies:**

Area Manager; Assistant Manager; Bureau of Land Management; California State Fish and Game; Comprehensive Conservation Plan; Corps of Engineers; Department of Justice; Deputy Director; Disease Monitoring and Disease Die-Off Program; Dive Team; Environmental Specialist; Federal Aid; FONSI (Finding of No Significant Impact) Impoundment System; Law Enforcement Agency; Maintenance Supervisor; Nature Conservancy; Northern Prairie Research; Office of Personnel Management (OPM); Park Ranger; Public Use Program; Realty Division; Refuge Supervisor; Region 1; Region 2; Region 5; Region 6; Regional Director; Secretary of the Interior; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Law Enforcement Division; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; U.S. Geological Survey; University of California; Veteran's Preference; Virginia Division of Game and Inland Fisheries; Waterfowl Management Program;

Wildlife/Critters:

Canvasback nesting; waterfowl;

Miscellaneous:

Delevan National Wildlife Refuge steel shot issue; "hundred-year flood"; prescribed burning; power-boating issue; wetland impoundments;